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ABSTRACT

More than 30 years after the Great Society initiatives, poverty continues to put large numbers of students at risk of school failure. The challenges to education and life success are most severe for children in the nation's poorest rural counties, the 535 rural persistent poverty (RPP) counties. This digest provides background on RPP counties and outlines some critical areas and types of multidisciplinary research needed to develop tools, programs, and community capacity to improve the quality of life, including education, in poor rural communities. Histories of inequality and outside control of resources have left many RPP communities with deep social stratification, low-performing schools, and low expectations for students from poor families. Reform efforts in RPP communities must take into account the economic, political, and social marginalization that continues to structure educational practice and community life. Building community capacity for change requires developing stronger human and social capital. In October 1999, an interdisciplinary group of researchers, policy makers, and experts in education and community engagement developed research agendas to help revitalize RPP communities. Their recommendations are outlined in three categories: capacity building (the role of interrelationships between school and community, local leadership capacities, and the impact of new technologies); policy research (rural disadvantages, policy bias, and policy impacts); and interdisciplinary focus across institutions and constituencies. (Contains 16 references.) (SV)

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Education and Development in Poor Rural Communities: An Interdisciplinary Research Agenda

by Carolyn S. Carter

More than a third of a century after the Great Society initiatives focused the nation's attention on inequalities of educational opportunity, poverty continues to put large numbers of students at risk of school failure (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). The "invisible" *rural* poor face particular challenges (Hodgkinson, 1994). The challenges to education and life success are most severe for children living in the nation's poorest rural counties, the 535 rural persistent poverty (RPP) counties.[1]

Teaching and learning happen within the social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic contexts of a particular "place." These contexts influence the opportunities students have to learn and what we expect of them. Although these contexts are interconnected, efforts to study and improve education, community services, economic development, and environmental protection often "pass in the night." Disciplinary structures of academe, departmentalized funding, lack of a shared definition of "rural," and implicit urban biases create many structural barriers in attempting to cope with the messy, nonlinear complexity of poor rural schools and communities.

Consequently, "the information specifically on poor, rural students, communities, and schools is sketchy, lacking in focus, and not comparable across studies" (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997, p. 93). For example, while rural schools educate their students as well as urban systems (Gibbs, Swaim, & Teixeira, 1998), it is not clear from the data how *poor* rural schools compare with *poor* urban schools.

This Digest provides background information on RPP counties and outlines critical areas and types of multidisciplinary research needed to develop tools, programs, and community capacity that can improve the quality of life, including education, in poor rural communities.

What Is Known about RPP Communities

Historically, most RPP communities developed from extraction-based economies in Appalachia, slave- and sharecropper-based economies in the rural South, migrant agricultural communities in the Southwest, and scattered Native American reservations in the northern and western United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1997). Histories of inequality and outside control of resources have left many RPP communities with deep social stratification, low-performing (sometimes dual) education systems, and low expectations for students from poor families. Schools are asked to prepare students for jobs that are not available locally, and resources are often controlled by outsiders or local leaders who rely on access to a cheap labor force.

Studies show a direct relationship between employment opportunities and the quality of schooling in distressed rural communities (Smith, 1992; Smith & DeYoung, 1992). When major employers need an educated workforce, they tend to support quality schooling. This support is reinforced by the participation of educated parents. However, when local employment opportunities are insufficient, the well educated tend to leave the area. The community then loses its investment in education.

Reform efforts in RPP communities also must take into account economic, political, and social marginalization that continues to structure educational practice and community life. Sustained reform requires not only engaging community support but changing traditional social forces that contribute to poverty (Duncan, 1999).

Building community capacity for change requires developing stronger *human* and *social* capital. Human capital is embodied in individuals' skills and knowledge and can be created through educational opportunities. Social capital, embodied in relationships among people, includes the webs of information flow, social norms, expectations, obligations, sanctions, and trust that make it possible to achieve particular goals (Coleman, 1988). Histories of social division across lines of class, culture, ethnicity, gender, or language in many RPP communities lead to fragmented relations and an inability to address school and community deficits (Putnam, 1995). Building social capital requires encompassing *all* segments of the community by forming equal partnerships with representatives of government, education (including higher education), economic development agencies, extension, churches/heritage institutions, civic groups, foundations, public/private entities, local media, and families.

In October 1999, an interdisciplinary group of researchers, policymakers, and experts in education and community engagement met to develop research agendas for revitalizing RPP communities. Participants at the conference, funded by the National Science Foundation, developed many of the recommendations outlined here (Kusimo, Keyes, Balow, Carter, & Poe, 1999). Their recommendations for research fall into three main categories: (1) capacity building, (2) policy, and (3) education and interdisciplinary approaches.

Capacity Building

Participants called for case studies, model development and testing, and evaluation studies to determine best practices. Additionally, other observers have called for robust comparative studies of poor and wealthy rural and urban schools (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). Useful research and development tools would include expanded databases and repositories for reports, videos, and multimedia representations.

Schools and community development. Much has been written about the potential role of schools in the economic life of rural communities and of schools as centers for community development; however, little research documents these interrelationships (Salant & Waller, 1998). A research agenda on the role of school/community linkages might include

- strengthening educational achievement and improving schools,
- helping youth become more resilient and adaptive,
- fostering lifelong learning,
- enriching community capacity building,
- revitalizing and developing communities (Hobbs, 1987; 1989),
- increasing educational expectations for all children,
- creating new paradigms for young people to stay in and "grow" their communities.

Local leadership capacities. Research on building community-based leadership in various capacities might include:

- democratizing relationships, building trust, addressing inequities in power structures, and involving all constituencies in decision making
- supporting parents as agents of change for children

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- developing new avenues for civic engagement (for example, grassroots access to media)
- identifying and building on cultural, historic, and economic assets
- identifying and supporting technology use, including new and emerging technology as well as extant forms of technology
- identifying reasonable targets of opportunity for capacity building (for example, creating school-based adult training programs in computer applications or other needed skills)
- understanding strategic economic activities, including how to "grow" good jobs, provide education for staying in the community, train for new jobs, and capitalize on community skills and assets.

Technology. New technologies and increasing access to distance learning, telecommuting, and e-commerce show promise for changing power dynamics and providing new opportunities in distressed rural communities. Research to document the impacts of telecommunications technologies on poor rural communities and schools and on social structures and power relationships in RPP communities would be helpful. Case studies of communities where both new technologies and appropriate technologies have been used, as well as research on planning for and use of tomorrow's technologies in distressed rural communities, would inform future development.

Policy

Many critical gaps exist in research on policy. Governmental policies needed to help facilitate change in one place can sometimes create barriers elsewhere. For example, rural areas are not eligible for many initiatives because they cannot meet "economies of scale" criteria or because they lack required partner institutions or infrastructure. Policies developed from implicitly urban models may exacerbate rural challenges, as in the case of recent legislation to reduce class size through hiring new teachers. Such efforts can weaken the teaching force in RPP communities when experienced teachers take new jobs in less distressed communities. Other policies that favor large schools compound the effects of poverty on the educational achievement of poor children (Howley & Bickel, 2000). Current policies related to infrastructure development often do not adequately address biases against poor rural communities.

Disenfranchisement creates particular policy challenges. Because democratic processes may not work in distressed communities, top-down approaches to reform or grants to local agencies may strengthen entrenched power structures that benefit from class divisions. Equal partnership may require extended efforts in capacity building among disenfranchised groups to increase participation and local leadership. Useful research would include studies on how to develop appropriate policies for RPP communities with disenfranchised groups.

Research on policy bias should (1) explore reasons and solutions for uneven development and unequal educational opportunities, particularly focusing on race and tribal issues; (2) compare government spending on rural programs with previous years and with urban/suburban monies; and (3) investigate ways political inequalities influence learning and opportunities to learn. Planners need studies of government devolution, demographic shifts, and ways to harness the underground economy, as well as policies that evaluate and fund dissemination of successful ideas.

Education and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Duncan (1999) argues "a good education is the key that unlocks and expands the cultural tool kits of the have-nots, and thus gives them the potential to bring about lasting social change in their persistently poor communities" (p. 208). To realize the goal of a quality education for all will require the collaboration of many players, including researchers from a variety of disciplines. The job will require new perspectives, tools, expertise, and research that build on assets and successfully

- involve multiple institutions and social structures;
- communicate in the "local language";
- partner equally with communities;
- include all constituencies, developing local leadership;
- cope with the realities of globalization and take advantage of the potential of e-commerce; and
- create the sense of efficacy, empowerment, self-determination, and hope that is essential to developing vital rural communities.

Successfully translating empowerment into community action calls for a much larger role for applied and action research. Such research must be participatory, owned by those affected by it, and grounded in community priorities. To address the challenges facing distressed rural communities, research must be powerful enough to guide us beyond rhetoric and to systemic action.

[1] Rural persistent poverty counties are defined as those below the poverty level in each of the census years 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1997). The majority of rural poor are Whites, but Hispanics and Blacks are disproportionately represented. According to a U.S. GAO (1993) report on rural school-age children, 34.8% of rural Hispanics, 40.8% of rural African Americans, 12.2% of rural Whites, 11.6% of rural Asians, and 59.6% of rural Native Americans live in poverty.

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